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# Smaller Than A Tree: A Choreographic Thesis

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Lisa Grecco

DA 460

Senior Thesis

8/10/88

SMALLER THAN A TREE

A Choreographic Thesis

When I entered LMU as a dance major in 1984 tension was my only perception of my limitations as a dancer since I saw and felt limitations solely as obstacles to improved technique.

"As a dancer, I have grown increasingly aware of my own physical limitations, the way and where my body stores tension, and how this tension is an obstacle to freer movement. I am interested, therefore, in discovering ways to release tension, initially for the purpose of improving my own dancing, and eventually as a means of helping others do the same.

"When I dance, walk and sit correctly, and my body is aligned, I feel free of tension, and I feel good, physically and mentally. I believe that health is directly affected by the proper use of physical energy," (attachment #2 of my LMU application).

In the past year as a senior dance major I have discovered that my limitations--what makes me, me--oddly enough makes me more a dancer. This is because exactly those quirks of habit, idiosyncrosies, etc. that I endeavor to eliminate in order to achieve technical and emotional purity, are the seeds out of which movement vocabulary grows from me.

My 1987-88 senior choreographic project was a dance entitled "Smaller than a Tree." This dance grew organically out of changes and discoveries in my physical, emotional and spiritual self. It was my first organically created project since the process parallels a sort of catharsis in my life.

"The movement utilizes balance and imbalance, focusing on the hips

which are the first joints affected by the movement of one's center (pelvis). There are two basic movement themes in this dance which are in many ways opposite to each other. These are used to create senses of physical and emotional extremes," (personal journal 1/12/88).

Because the movement vocabulary in this dance is organic to me, stemming from personal sources, I seem to be asking and answering questions, both conscious and subconscious, solving some mysteries, discovering fantasies and gaining self-identity. Choreographing is a process of getting honest which, like life, involves risk and struggle.

On the physical level "Smaller than a Tree" flirts with the extremes of balance/imbalance and classical/collapsed line since the movement vocabulary reflects a personal transition in dance technique. In the past year my dancing has begun transforming to reflect these extremes.

I used to feel more bound and controlled but now I frequently experience a total loss of technical control, balance and placement. I am assured by my teachers that things are shifting for the better. In my confident phases I experience this as fun, while in my insecure phases I am distressed.

The physical changes affect me emotionally and vice versa. Of course, I am disconcerted--my foundation seems to fall from under me. Subjective memories and fears attempt to sprout through to consciousness making me more vulnerable.

"I pray a lot. I sense I am ultimately changing for the better, but

I am afraid. I don't know what is happening to me. I fight with myself and others because of the passion I feel and because I resist the whole thing," (journal 11/16/87).

Choreographing is a whole experience for me because it affects my entire person. I believe that "Smaller than a Tree" reflects my life since the dancing suggests the struggle involved in growing. When I became aware that I was struggling I then discovered that my choreography embraced this struggle. Therein lies the element of risk; changing requires taking risks, and this is often difficult to do.

"Cirque du Soleil" thrilled and moved me. I cried and laughed and gasped and cried and laughed and gasped. My piece is about clowns because clowns are about people, people who allow themselves to be children and make mistakes--slip and fall, make a mess, like at the table, blah, blah, blah...it is also about growing up, reaching up and out," (12/15/87).

The choreography counters two types of movement themes. One is aggressive and fast-paced, exploring for me outward, physical activity and interaction with other physical beings. The other is passive, softer, extremely slow and continuous, revealing personal, inward searching.

Gary Bates, Assistant Professor of Dance at Loyola Marymount University, attempted many times to discourage my use of the slow, spiritual movement vocabulary in "Smaller than a Tree." I resisted this adamantly, unsure for a long time exactly why I felt it belonged in the piece, juxtaposed with the active movement theme. The creative

process ultimately revealed to me that the themes actually grow into and out of each other.

When the purpose of presenting the two extreme themes became clearer to me I realized that by fully experiencing my own inward struggle, imbalance, questioning and lack of control, I might develop strength, balance and a sense of security. In the dance the secure, balanced movement cycles back into collapsed, introspective movement, portraying a real emotional cycle in life, one with which I identify.

"Why is risk so ritualistically avoided? It is boring when life holds no chances in its unfoldment, you know. Does one ever truly feel safe?" (7/4/88).

I did not understand the intention of the struggle until the dance was nearly completed. At some point when I "lost my technique" I suppose I acquired some courage. I began to enjoy my state of instability and question. I experienced honest fun. This was new.

I had an inkling of organic movement--a tiny phrase in which I played with moving my hips, or center, and discovered the elements of balance and imbalance. Playing in this simple phrase gave me a physical vehicle in which to work out my obvious instability. This playing changed confusion and fear over my predicament into constructive and creative problem solving.

At this time I decided that my dance was going to be a "happy dance" as Judy Scalini, Professor of Dance at Loyola Marymount University, might say, since I felt happy. I could actually make light and fun

of an otherwise frightening situation.

"This clumsy, imbalanced side of me has inspired, interestingly, the vocabulary for my present choreographic project. It is important for me to choreograph a dance right now about this insecure, imbalanced, awkward yet fun place I am in because I am trying to look at and love myself so that I may look at and love others from this place.

"It is a place that everyone experiences to some degree. I want to be involved in living, relating and communicating with others. I happen to be doing this through movement. I have come to enjoy this awkwardness I find myself in and I must, absolutely must dance about and in it. Martha Graham once said, 'The highest function of the dance is to ennoble man's concept of himself,' (The Dance Notebook. Philadelphia: Running Press, 1984). In this sense I suppose that what I am attempting to do with this movement of mine is express and dignify my, and everyone's occasional awkwardness," (Personal Dance Philosophy Paper, Senior Thesis Class 12/20/87).

This feeling of elation and drive stayed with me for the following eight months as I formed the dance, "Smaller than a Tree." I rolled merrily along and all over the floor, movement which laid claim in both my movement themes, eventually intending transition.

I used rolling to enter and exit the space, as aggressive action and passive reaction to it. It became most clearly, though, the resulting momentum caused by the transition between balance and imbalance. Rolling and reaching began and ended the dance, and during it were the motions from and into which the dancers changed from one movement theme into the other, creating a cycle.

This piece became a collaborative project between Thomas Grimley, a LMU senior music major, and me. We had already worked together on two short filmdances in the Fall 1987 semester and now discovered that the musical sketches that Tom had originally prepared for the filmdances actually complemented my group movement vocabulary.

By accompanying the rehearsals on piano Tom began developing his musical ideas while my choreographic ideas took form. The fact that the music and dance were being created together, in addition to having live accompaniment for rehearsals, was very exciting for everyone involved. We regarded the collaboration as a tremendous learning experience and were challenged and supported by each other's creative input.

Early in the Spring 1988 semester the collaboration caused a minor controversy within the LMU dance department. There was something about the music (or was it the movement) that seemed unsettling to my teachers.

Judy Scalin was unable to fully express what it was that she did not like except to say that the music seemed grating. Gary Bates finally alerted us to the fact that both the music and movement were unsettling, especially to an older generation, because they seemed "punk" in their expression. This surprised us. I saw and heard emotions expressed blatantly by means of disharmony, atonality, false endings, noise, aggression, and collapse and perversion of traditional, classical modes of artistic expression. An older generation may view this as anger. It was simply honest as far as I was concerned.



That my teachers criticized the music in its raw, and innocent state, as well as attempted to draw many exaggerated conclusions about the intentions of the movement was curious. The intentions and collaborative success were more obvious to us. We never questioned whether the music worked with the movement but instead intuitively agreed it was right from the start.

I got the impression that because we were younger than our teachers, they felt we had an immature sense of aesthetics--less than was necessary to understand when a collaborative effort succeeded. Much concern over the composer's technical skill was also expressed to me. For a brief period Tom actually considered giving the performing task to a more skilled pianist. I believed that his style of playing his own composition was essential to the favorable way it fit the movement. The music and movement shared a childlike quality. Eventually Tom brought in additional instruments so that his band, Waldo the Dog Faced Boy, played live during the performances. Again, this development felt intuitively correct.

The struggle within the dance department regarding this project pushed me into reliance on personal intuition despite others' disapproval. It also enabled me to recognize the anger and resistance represented in the dance, itself; thus, I recognized its so-called rebel quality. My teachers' responses surprised me...I felt they were not acknowledging the fact that an actual collaboration was occurring, even if awkwardly. Besides, the awkwardness that seemed to bother everyone was exactly one of the things the movement and music attempted to portray.

In March 1988, after the final studio showing of "Smaller than a

Tree," my teachers required that I shorten the dance from twelve and a half minutes to eight. They also attempted to push me into emphasizing the anger in the piece saying it had gone into the "Bizarre".

I fought the idea of removing four and a half minutes of my dance. I thought the piece was complete. The form had evolved naturally to this length and to edit it felt like an intellectual imposition.

The collaboration with Tom proved valuable--I determined what to change in and eliminate from the dance with the composer's help. Because I trusted that the music and movement were so akin, I looked to make changes in the dance according to where I learned, in the music, things did not work very well, were repeated too much or could not be developed any further. Sad as it was to discard so much of the dance, which felt sacred to me at that time, in the next rehearsal I was able to shorten the beginning, remove a whole middle section and change and set the end of the dance. Now Tom could set his music.

Of course, the dance dealt with anger, as my teachers believed, but not exclusively, my collaborator reminded me. I believed that I explored everything in this dance. I continually attempted to verbalize my encompassing intentions.

"Smaller than a Tree" is a dance about opposites, extremes and what is between them...about extremes like the exploding or quiet heart, balance and imbalance...about extremes, the exploding or quiet heart and everything between...." (4/12/88).

I was trying to find amore eloquent way of stating my intentions,

since pressure was on to do so, verbally, for the upcoming Spring Concert program. I wanted to do so without having to use the words: "love/hate, joy/sadness, aggression/passivity, success/failure," etc. I felt passionately involved in the work and was also resisting the requirement of having to communicate in words what I felt was best expressed in the dance, itself.

The awareness that my dance reflected my life occurred in stages and continues to develop and change even now as I prepare this thesis. I was slow to realize that "passion" was a perfect way to describe what I felt since I was filled with the whole range of emotions.

The eight minute time limit had to be met in order for the piece to premier in the Spring Concert which was now only a few weeks away. I initially resisted this requirement and the other challenges my teachers gave me. Condensing the piece forced me to focus my intentions, however, and this was essential. This focus shocked me as had all the realizations during this project.

Concerned with the time limit, initially rebellious to it, and now in an attempt to make fun of it I decided that an alarm should go off at the end of the piece. This would upset the calm, ending mood and interrupt the dance. I was now acknowledging my affinity with deviance.

One deadline I did not meet was in preparing the statement of intention for the concert program. Because I felt strongly about the collaborative element in this project I wanted the statement to explain something about the music as well as the movement. Resisting

yet another requirement Tom and I nevertheless made several attempts to prepare a conjunct statement.

"Tom Grimley and Lisa Grecco first collaborated on two film dances, "Quanda Mossa" and "Sorrowfun", in the fall of 1987 during which time we discovered the interdependence of music and dance.

"We entered the project which has become "Smaller than a Tree" with independent and individual ideas of music and dance and have discovered through collaboration that these have developed and combined into one encompassing work.

"In first simplifying our individual vocabularies we then consciously balanced gestures inherent in the music and the dance and explored the communication between them.

"We trusted each other's creative impulses and found that we interacted on a level that neither really understood, exactly because we do not know where the creative impulses came from.

"The result of this trust has rendered the work more personal, honest and exposing than we can easily discuss outside of presenting "Smaller than a Tree," (4/23/88).

This first submission was thought unacceptable. Someone else's words appeared in the program copy which was circulated for proof-reading. I was not happy about this. Tom and I worked on another statement and felt that it finally fulfilled its purpose.

"Smaller than a Tree" is a work about extremes and the subtleties

of development inherent between them.

"The music explores extremes in dynamics, tempo and melodic activity. The movement flirts with classical and unconventional theories. Together the music and dance fight the limitations of technique, developing strong individual gestures through interaction.

"By exploring extremes "Smaller than a Tree" creates an emotional and physical sense of balance and imbalance," (4/25/88).

This statement was never printed because I submitted it only a few hours after the program had been sent out to be typeset. I was not happy but out of luck.

Somehow my discontent about the reactions and resistance to certain elements of the project provided me with a greater clarity about the situations and problems in my life which I now perceived in my dance, including ambiguity in male/female relationships. The movement involved a lot of partnering and expressed balance and imbalance in regard to passivity and aggression, classic feminine/masculine elements.

Earlier in the process I thought about calling the dance "Danger" from "Dangier" which, in Latin, means balance between female/male elements, literally meaning the female power to give or withhold/ the male power to act or hurt.

When passive or aggressive behavior is appropriate to either sex in a male/female relationship is an issue I wonder much about. I

attempted to deal with this issue in my movement. I eventually saw that I had recreated, in the dance, specific relationship patterns from my life: solitude and loneliness; romantic relationships which struggle with attachment for a long time and eventually fail; platonic relationships which contain seeming harmony due to limited emotionalism; romantic fantasy which is a perfect balance between male and female energies; and a community relationship which offers both chaos and support.

"The beginning of the dance signifies struggling to get going, get moving, to get up, grow up. It is about fear of these things, too.

"When the solo female stands it is about struggling to maintain control and balance. Retreating is the falling backwards. Pushing forward through the hip before leg-swinging means defiance, an attempt at gaining control.

"The first couple is about these same things only in relation to each other. Struggling to work with another person. Trying to kick someone out of one's way or give them the space to move out of the way. Losing control together. Rising and falling, then daring each other, blaming the other. Fighting. This relationship is not working and needs to end. This whole duet is about a sense of inappropriate attachment.

"The second duet is not the same. There is less awkwardness about them. They are not attached. They literally do not touch as the first couple did. They are not involved as the first couple was. There is no history to their relationship.

"They look over their shoulders to see what has gone before, but they keep moving forward. They enter backwards, actually, and already caught up in the movement as though rebounding from some other relationships. These two flirt with each other but decide not to get involved. They have no cause to fight or blame. They separate.

"Now everyone is alone and floundering. Each person struggles to maintain balance and composure. A woman struggles to reach up and grow out of her inner confusion and pain, attains an instant of balance and release but then, as if a memory, a man enters and as he stands, she falls and exits.

"Two men signify brotherhood or platonic friendship, that sort of easy, unemotional harmony and similarity that males seem to establish together. They move through it all together and without visible, inner struggle. There is a sense of detachment, though.

"One man turns abruptly and faces a woman who has slowly moved into the space. She sort of struggles and resists getting there. She seems a bit sheepish, not bold. The push-through-the-hip walk she takes seems to make her enter this space against her own will. She feels compelled to enter but cautious. She does not use her arms in this walk indicating her reluctance to make herself available to the man. She feels somewhat shy and afraid of approaching him, facing him and facing romance.

"But they face each other and surrender to their inevitable romance. They do the love duet. They move in harmony. Sometimes their

movement is unison; at other times we see the male act and the female react, as in giving--she is more shy than he. She swoons. There is a give and take, a sweet balance, "dangier." We feel that they are each other's beloved. He makes her face and look at him. They rise and struggle by tugging on each other, but it is not really a fight. It is an equal exchange of feeling, communication and strengths. It is sort of fun.

"The trio comes in as these two part and this is to sweep the male up into their chaos. This is often how people wind up making decisions and moves in life--because of uncontrollable circumstances around them, or because they allow themselves to become vulnerable to the circumstances. In this trio the male of the love duet joins because he is vulnerable. They attempt to slow down and move together in order to create some sense of it. They reach together and then fall on their behinds. They then split off again into different directions and movements.

"In rolls the female of the love duet. She is completely out of control and out of sync, even with the group confusion. She appears to be plotting a course through the madness in order to get involved with the others. The men do unison movement at first, indicating the active and controlled ones. The female of the trio is in a total frenzie. She's the same female who balanced briefly during the floundering section. She now has her back to the audience (world)--does not know where front or up is. She is trying to do the slow movement vocabulary but cannot slow herself down. She tries to reach up, then slams face down into the floor.



"The men look over their shoulders, at the past, checking to see what they are leaving behind or what is behind them (they seem self-conscious and afraid). Hesitantly, yet confrontationally approaching the women. They do the kicking leg-swings in each other's direction, lose composure and balance and fall into the floor.

"Now everyone is on the floor, rolling, reaching, struggling, circling. In a circle they all reach and fall, heads in, to face the group. Immediately backing away, retreating, they cannot deal with the confrontation, the power, the honesty that exists in the group, which signifies humanity. They cannot face each other's emotions, nor face their own, reflected in the faces of those they see. They retreat, afraid, yet playfully.

"More ups and downs. More playing around, then confronting the opposite sex again. Mad as hell, afraid as hell here. The women try to kick the men out of their way. They continue swinging their legs out of control. The men are aggressive. It's a love-game-fight. The men grab hold of the women's legs and in swinging them through to the ground attempt to take control.

"The women retaliate--roll and knock the men down but catch them later when they are about to fall. They toss the men away but roll along side them. They roll over each other and give mutual support. In this way they also unintentionally step on one another. The men attempt to get up and knock the women to the floor. The women try to stand and the couples, like bimbos, bump butts sending each other face into the floor.

"Now all move in unison making an attempt at commanding personal control. They all lose balance and are on the floor again. They are moving in a circle again. They attempt to get up repeatedly, indicated by the roll-reaches. They are trying to catch up with the pace of the circle, life, and fall, again, splat, into the circle to face each other

"This time there is surrender. This is obvious because they stay here. There is a big pause and silence here. They have all realized something. There is some unity in this. Some sense of community. They are not really alone in the struggle. They check over their shoulders, looking up in a searching way. They breathe heavily--they are tired of all the running and rolling around. Now they slowly roll over and lie down. More surrender. Together they begin the slow movement vocabulary. Here they go again but with some sense of companionship and community.

"They eventually form male/female couples which symbolizes completion. As the dance ends they reach up alongside their partners and there is a sense of hope," (journal 3/24/88).

After looking at the dance and making these associations I could then express to my dancers what the piece was about. I told them it was about struggle--personal struggle to get up and grow up; struggle to maintain balance; control and composure; struggle in relationships; relationships that do not work; fear of relationships; poignant and powerful relationships that work; anger and pain and seeing it in others; confusion in life; helping and hurting each other; surrender; acceptance that life has such struggles; and making peace with the struggles once we realize that we are really not alone in them.

Toward the end of the Spring 1988 semester, approaching the LMU Dance Concert all choreographers who were dancing in their own pieces were asked to give up their directorship to a mentor from outside the work. I began to understand the death involved in giving up a creative work to an audience.

We never performed the piece in such a way that really satisfied me. It was not as tight and slick as I believed it could be, especially toward its end in the fast-paced, climactic, unison section. We seemed to lag behind the music here. It looked sloppy in this section and I did not envision it as such. And I was frustrated about the polite quality the dance had taken on which became most apparent when we performed it a week after the Spring Concert at Tom's senior music recital. I wanted the piece to rock.

Having been asked to be guest artist at an independent concert at California State University, Dominguez Hills, our ensemble of musicians and dancers performed the piece in yet another space. It was at this concert, in particular, that I suppose I abandoned the work, but perhaps not for the right reasons.

I had developed a very bad cold that week. It was hard for me to breathe and therefore I had little energy to fight against the direction the piece had taken. I was convinced that the dance had lost its "edges" because the dancers in it were not quite technically able to execute the classical and balanced movement vocabulary. Without being able to set up that extreme the intention of the cycle was lost.

I may soon be involved in working on a video version of this dance.

It will have to be condensed into five minutes and I am willing to do this. It has become less sacred to me now because of my distance from it and because I can look at it more objectively.

The creating of it almost seems like a dream. For a few months I doubted I could ever create something as interesting again. I had an idea for a new dance but was blocked when it came to setting new movement.

All my improvisational work this summer still plays with the same movement ideas as in "Smaller than a Tree." I see now, however, that I am choreographing about two extreme types of movements because these are universal experiences, not just mine.

My next dance will deal more clearly with the cycle of collapse and extension, or balance and imbalance. I have discovered how important an influence ballet has on my choreography as well as my more deviant improvisational dancing. My interests in classical and deviant (what my teachers might refer to as punk) are equally keen. I find it extremely challenging to choreograph dances which relate the two, but inescapable since these are what I love to do.

Because I may now choreograph I feel I can communicate what I love to do. These two movement vocabularies seem opposite, but because of "Smaller than a Tree" I understand more clearly my desire to demonstrate how they develop one into the other. Most important, I feel, is the understanding that this desire may touch everyone who watches my choreography since I believe everyone seeks a peace which lies between emotional extremes.

It is interesting to view art as expression of quirks, limitations

or problems that artists wish to resolve. But this is often where artistic expression comes from. This has been my experience with "Smaller than a Tree."

"In re-reading my journal, preparing and gathering information to finally write this thesis on "Smaller than a Tree," especially the attempts at verbalizing the meaning of the dance and all the attempts at a statement of intention, I notice how my impressions changed as I changed. Even now I see in my dance things I could not see before. Certain things seem more specific and this makes me wonder what significance or permanence any of it may have.

"Since it all seems like a process of refining ideas and movements I imagine I might never feel that the piece was finished. I also realize that I may attach any meaning I want onto my work. There seems to be a place where art can mean anything or nothing at all to us, depending on our own perceptions and life experiences. Our own state of affairs affects our judgement of what we view.

"Perhaps a true art form has the very ability to evoke many different responses and interpretations in people. Art should be whole and universal in its significance so that it affects people other than its creator. Perhaps more self-indulgent forms are more one dimensional meaning only one, obvious thing," (journal 7/18/88).

If this is true then I am glad to have caused so many different responses with the project and the dance. Recently someone I work with told me they thought the dance was about underwater creatures!

I look back on the experience and feel that I was not really making

it all happen. It seemed to be driving me. I had not thought it all through beforehand.

This dance came from a movement place and for this reason I consider it my first true organic choreography. This project has helped me grow because I choreographed about situations in my life. I can now actually consider myself a choreographer and I like this. I am grateful to the LMU dance department and everyone involved in this project since they all helped me grow.